FILM GUIDE

Tibetan Buddhism Part III: The Wheel of Life - The Central Doctrines of Tibetan Buddhism

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FILM GUIDE
TIBETAN BUDDHISM PART THREE:
THE WHEEL OF LIFE - THE CENTRAL DOCTRINES
OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

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India, like other great classical civilizations, abounded with depictions of religious deities representing peoples' gods and spiritual aspirations.

Among the greatest treasures of Buddhist art in India are the Ajanta Caves. Here among these magnificent art works is a fresco, probably painted during the fifth century A.D., which is unique among all other surviving classical Indian paintings.

It is a circle, or wheel, containing figures depicting life in ancient India and presenting perhaps the earliest and most fundamental teachings of the Buddha.

But even this much of its meaning was uncertain until the secret of the wheel was revealed by the Buddhist monks of Tibet who had been painting this wheel continuously for more than a thousand years.

The teachings of Buddhism faded from India after the Muslim invasions of the 9th to 12th centuries A.D.

During that time, many Indian Buddhist monks journeyed Northward beyond the Himalayas to Tibet.

Isolated from much of the turmoil of India and China, Tibetan monks preserved the teachings of Indian Buddhism.

Ironically, it was the 1959 Chinese takeover of Tibet that forced thousands of Tibetan monks into exile Southward over the Himalaya mountains into India, Nepal, and the rest of the world.

Along with their other teachings, Tibetan monks described the secrets of this wheel which they called the wheel of life... in Tibetan, srid p'ai 'khor lo... in Sanskrit, bhava chakra.

Eminent Tibetan scholars cited Sanskrit scriptures such as the Vinaya Sutra and the Bhiksuni Vibhanga which quote the Buddha as saying, "Ananda, the two great teachers, Shariputra and Modgalayanq, will not always be present. Therefore, I advise that a five-part wheel be painted in the vestibule."

Many details of this wheel may have been prescribed by the Buddha to the palace artist of an Indian king named Bhimbisara, who then presented it to the king Utayana as a gift.

In the 8th century AD, the image of the wheel was brought to Tibet by Bhande Yeshe and painted on Tibet's first monastery called Samye Ling.

Today, Tibetan monks still use this possibly 2,500 year old visual aid to describe the Buddha's most central teachings -- The Four Noble Truths -- the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of cessation, and the truth to the path to the cessation of suffering.

The truth of suffering is the doctrine that life for all creatures is essentially bound together with the unpleasant and the miserable. This is the most prominent of the four noble truths described by the wheel.

Suffering pervades all the three realms of the Buddhist Universe: the form realm, the formless realm and the desire realm.

The Wheel of Life depicts suffering as it
pertains to just one realm, the desire realm—the realm inhabited by five types of creatures: which are the humans, the animals, the hell dwellers, the pretas or hungry spirits, and the beings of the heavens who are the gods and the asuras or lesser gods.

The processes whereby suffering is perpetuated in the lives of individual beings is depicted by the outer ring divided into twelve links of dependent origination.

[Pig, Rooster, and Snake] The central causes of suffering are illustrated in the center of the wheel by the pig, the rooster and the snake. They represent "The Three Poisons": ignorance, attachment and hatred which infect all sentient creatures everywhere with endless life times of misery.

[Yama] The horrible grasp which our ignorance, attachment and hatred have over our future lives is symbolized by Yama, the so-called "Lord of Death", who holds the futures of all beings in his jaws and claws.

[Moon] The potential for a cessation from suffering is merely indicated here by the full moon which with its cooling light represents nirvana.

[Buddha] The path leading to that nirvana is indicated by an image of the Buddha, pointing his finger to the moon, and by verses at the bottom of the painting.

[Inner Ring] The effects of either virtuous or non-virtuous actions are illustrated by the figures in the white and black inner circle. The virtuous white path leads upward to heaven, while the sins of the black path lead to suffering and hell in the lower realms of existence.

[Humans] Among all the creatures of existence, human beings are believed to occupy the most fortunate position.

As a species, humans have the greatest capacity for religious practice. They feel just enough pain to be motivated to renounce worldly life, and they have a sharp enough intellect to find a path away from the prison of the rounds of worldly existence.

Humans can fully realize that, although there are occasional periods of happiness and satisfaction, human lives are generally bound up in the pursuit of objects that falsely promise happiness.

The best pursuit of all is a religious one that works toward the complete emancipation of oneself and others.

To pursue this end, a good Buddhist reveres the three jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma or the Teachings, and the Sangha, or the religious community.

The religious goal is exemplified by the Buddhist monks who provide teachings and prayers for the rest of humanity to follow.

A preponderance of good karma or, virtuous thoughts and actions can lead to rebirth in the next life as a human or a god.

But bad karma, or non-virtuous thoughts and actions can lead to rebirth in the realms of animals, or worse, in the hells.

[Animals] Depending on the quality of one's karma, a human reborn as an animal can experience a life as easy as that of a
household cat, or as horrid as a laboratory test animal or an animal of prey.

Low and unfortunate birth is caused by committing the ten non-virtues: killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, slander, abusing others, gossip, craving, ill will, and wrong views.

[Asuras] Birth as a lesser god is caused by a combination of virtuous karma and worldly power.

They possess supernatural fighting powers which enable them to battle constantly over their heavenly territories.

[Gods] But the gods, free from the ten non-virtues in a previous life, simply enjoy themselves for thousands of years.

They think that their joy is permanent.

They don't realize that by living such a selfishly happy life, they are using up the merits which sent them to heaven in the first place.

Eventually, they use up their merits and die a death full of mental anguish and come crashing down to life in the human realm or the three bad realms.

[Three Poisons] The central causes of the round of suffering are the "Three Poisons". These are ignorance, attachment and hatred.

[Ignorance, Pig] Ignorance, depicted by the pig, is the root cause of the round of suffering.

[Attachment, Rooster] Attachment, depicted by the rooster, accompanies ignorance.

[Hatred, Snake] Hatred, symbolized by the snake, arises from attachment.

The three poisons chase each other round and round, causing endless cycles of suffering, cycles which can only be broken by cultivating the wisdom and method of a
Buddha.

The processes whereby the three poisons perpetuate endless lifetimes in samsara are illustrated by the outer ring. Here, the twelve links of dependent origination describe how someone's ignorance influences the qualities of mind, body, and even the surrounding environment.

[Blind Man] Ignorance, the first link in the chain of samsara is symbolized by a blind person who gropes in darkness without directly seeing reality.

Ignorance is blind to the true nature of the self and the world around. It fails to see that temporary worldly pleasures are the causes of future misery.

[Potter] Karma, the second link, is the result of ignorance because it colors all mental and physical activities with relative degrees of good and bad.

Like a potter molding clay, the relative qualities of each mental and physical act determine the shape of things to come.

[Monkey] Consciousness, the third link, when conditioned by ignorance and karma of a previous life, flits back and forth like a monkey from one object to the next.

Human consciousness begins with conception--the fertile conjoining of the sperm and egg together with a mind conditioned by previous lives.

[Boat] Name and form, the fourth link, depend on the quality of consciousness. They are analogous to a mind and body, here represented by an oarsman steering a boat down the river.

[House] Mind and body are the basis for the six senses, the fifth link.

They are the organs for touching, tasting, smelling, hearing, seeing and mental perceptions.

[Man and Woman] Contact, the sixth link, is made possible by the six senses. Contact is represented by sexual embrace, the most potent sensation.

[Arrow in Eye] Feeling, the seventh link, arises from contact with the outside world.

Inevitably, all feelings result in suffering, here represented by an arrow in the eye.

[Tea Ceremony] Craving, the eighth link, is the result of feeling. For example, the feeling of a sexual embrace produces a craving for more.

But craving can include the strong desire to be separated from an unpleasant object.

[Woman and Fruit] Attachment, the ninth link, is represented by a person grasping for the fruit of previous desires.

The quality of the next life is influenced by the kind of objects to which one is attached in the present life.

[Pregnancy] The tenth link is called existence because it is a mental and physical state of being which foretells the nature of the next lifetime.

[Giving Birth] Birth, the eleventh link, is
predicted by the causal chain of all thoughts and actions of the previous life.

Birth will be fortunate or unfortunate depending on the relative merits accumulated in the past.

[Death] Aging and death, the twelfth link, are merely the last moment before a new birth. Powerful prayers and meditation at this time can help create a happy future life.

According to Buddhist doctrine, all ordinary sentient beings are bound to continual rebirth in samsara, the round of suffering.

[ Satoshi Kusakabe: Buddha and Moon ] Human beings are tied to the links of dependent origination, and their only hope for release is by following the path of the teachings of wisdom and morality taught by the Buddha.

The path of the Buddha leads to the cessation of suffering and the final escape from the evil clutches of Yama... and from the horrible grasp of one's own ignorance, attachment and hatred.

This in brief is the message of the Wheel of Life, a painting which adorns the entrance walls of many Tibetan Buddhist monasteries throughout the Himalayas.

[Yama] Yama symbolizes the death grip of karma over the future of all living things.

Karma is the accumulated seed bank of mental and physical activities which promote more suffering and prevent the realization of nirvana.

Karma is caused by the three poisons: ignorance, attachment and hatred.

[ Blindman ] Ignorance leads blindly towards miserable destinies.

Ignorance is like a farmer who sows the seeds for future growth.

[ Potter ] The seeds are like people's karma. Karma molds the future of every individual, just like a potter molds the contours of every clay pot.

[ Monkey ] Consciousness is the field into which the seeds of karma are planted by ignorance the farmer.

Consciousness implanted with ignorance will grow wild like the monkey.

[ Boat ] Name and form, or mind and body, are like a passenger in a boat, the mind joins the body through the pleasures and pains of
life.

[House] Mind and body experience the outside world through the windows of the six senses.

How and what they perceive depend on the qualities of mind and body conditioned by ignorance.

[Embrace] Contact with the world is made possible by the six senses.

[Arrow] While contact is objective, feeling is subjective and stimulates craving to own the objects of feeling.

Craving is the intense urge to possess the objects of our feelings. It is like the sun's heat on the field of consciousness which ripens the seeds of karma planted in a previous life.

[Monastery] For those in the prison of human existence, the life of a Buddhist monk offers the most direct escape.

The monks transmit the teachings of the Buddha and provide examples of ethics and wisdom which can serve as paths to freedom.

[Humans] Yet, most humans ignore the chance to be free. Ignorantly, they plant their mental fields with the seeds for future lives and indulge in such temporary pleasures as life provides.

Only a few realize that they are imprisoned by their own ignorance, attachment and hatred.

Those wise few follow the teaching of the Buddha along the pathway to freedom.

[Monk] Meditating on the horrors of never ending life and death, they cultivate compassion and the wisdom of emptiness.

[Animal] The animal realm is more unpleasant and more difficult to escape from than is the prison of human life.

Individuals are born as animals because they committed some of the ten non-virtuous thoughts and acts in a previous life.

They were selfish, stole from others, killed to
achieve their purposes, committed sexual offenses, spoke harshly to others, or had little control over their own minds.

The actual species of animal depends on the degree and frequency of one's earlier sinful acts, and on one's mental intentions before, during and after those acts.

Suffering here is proportional to the sinful act -- with distinctions, for example, between killing in self defense, manslaughter, and first, second or third degree murder.

But an animal's life is usually short. Therefore, a prison term in the animal realm is far preferable to a prison term in either the realms of hell or of the hungry ghosts.

[Hungry Ghosts] A prison term in the realm of the pretas, or hungry ghosts, can be infinitely longer and more difficult than a prison term in the realm of the animals.

Pretas are constantly allured by visions of sensual delight, only to be burned by their touch.

Their long necks and bloated bellies are manifestations of their constant cravings and dissatisfaction.

In a previous life, the hungry ghosts committed such crimes as stealing, lying, killing, or sexual abuse while motivated by extreme selfishness and avarice.

[Hecks] By far the worst realm is the prison of hell.

In the cold hell, sinners are repaid in kind for mistreating subordinates in previous lives.

In the hot hells, evil doers are continuously boiled and burnt for causing others similar pain.

Violent misconduct is punished in manifold ways.

Murder and persecution are repaid by horrifying acts of torture.

[Lesser Gods] An also violent but infinitely less painful realm is the heaven of the asuras, or lesser gods.

Deluded by the prowess of their supernatural strength, they don't even recognize their own imprisonment.

Perhaps in their previous lives, the asuras were benevolent but envious and competitive rulers. Even though many of their actions may have caused others pain, still their motivation was generally good.

The asuras' good ethical intentions combined with their propensity to fight, produced their special karma.

After the virtuous seeds of previous good acts have ripened, flowered and wilted, the asuras will die and fall to rebirth in a far less pleasant prison.

[Heavens] The realm of the gods is the most deceptive of all. How could these heavenly beings believe they're in prison?

Heaven is the abode for very good people, who have not yet entered into the higher religious practices of Buddhism.

Had they practiced a higher meditation and a higher wisdom to accompany their basic
good conduct, they may have escaped samsara forever.

Instead, after many years of happy living in heaven, they exhaust their merit and fall to the depths of hell before Yama, who renders judgement consistent with their sins from previous lives.

The tragedy of these former gods is poignant. Having reached the summits of heaven, they find that they are still prone to....

....Death which was predicted by birth....
....and birth caused by an earlier existence....
....and to existence which was molded by attachment....
....and to attachment caused by craving....
....and to craving caused by feeling....
....and to feeling caused by contact....
....and to contact made possible by the six senses....
....and to the six senses based on name and form -- body and mind....
....and to name and form arising from consciousness....
....and to consciousness infected by karma....
....and to karma planted by ignorance....
....and to ignorance which lacks the realization of the four noble truths.

Of all the causes of imprisonment in the Wheel of Life, ignorance is the root.

[Rooster and Snake] It gives rise to attachment and hatred which infect all sentient life with the disease of rebirth in the Wheel of Life.

The best cure for the disease of endless rebirth is found in the practice of the six perfections taught by the Buddha in all the realms of existence.

[Buddha] The practice of giving is a truly selfless state of mind which gives wisely without thought of compensation.

The practice of the perfection of morality is the abstention from non-virtues and the cultivation of virtuous thoughts and actions.

This, as are all the six perfection, based on the vow to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all other beings.

The practice of the perfection of patience is the inner armor guarding against frustration with oneself, and guarding against harsh words, hatred and violent actions against others.

The practice of the perfection of perseverance is the constant enthusiastic application of one's effort towards meditation and the practice of morality.

The practice of the perfection of meditation is the perfect control of the mind to concentrate without distraction.

The practice of the perfection of wisdom is the intellectual analysis and the special insight into the emptiness and dependent
origination of all things.

The perfect practice of each of these six perfection requires the simultaneous practice of the other five.

When these have been accomplished, the truth of the path has been completed, and the mind is free from suffering. One is free from the obstacles which impede perfect knowledge.

This freedom, or extinction of suffering and of all mental obstacles, is nirvana, the truth of the highest cessation.

And these are the secrets hidden in the frescoes at Ajanta which were revealed by the Buddhist teachers of Tibet.

The Wheel of Life contains the message of the four noble truths taught in India by the Buddha twenty-five hundred years ago.